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Urbanizing the nation-state? Notes on the geopolitical growth of cities and city-regions

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ABSTRACT

This article suggests that the developments during the past few decades indicate a qualitative shift in the city/state relation, and conceptualizes this shift as the geopolitical growth of cities and city-regions. Originally a state-orchestrated process, today this is manifested in the attempts of major cities and city-regions, in particular, to demand a stronger national and international political role even as claims are made for urban separatism. This process is connected to a geopolitical reasoning of the heightened role of cities in inter-state competition during the age of post-Fordist capitalism. Furthermore, the geopolitical growth of cities and city-regions is partly constituted in academic theories and expert knowledges that combine certain type of urbanism, economic growth, and political success, and which in so doing destabilize state-centered geopolitical imaginations.

KEYWORDS: [Geopolitics](#), [cities](#), [city-regions](#), [the state](#), [spatial transformation](#)

The entanglement of the nation-state and the city is one of the grand themes of modernity. Much of nation-state history and national identity has been construed and contested in cities. Moreover, “national” political forces and political parties have had a crucial impact on the development of urban politics, on the idea of modern city, and on the forms of cities in different state contexts. Cities have not only represented a challenge for national political regulation and the maintenance of social order, but have also been constituents of state power, not least because of their role as strategically, materially and symbolically important spaces of capital accumulation and wealth generation.

The nation-state and the city have been historically co-constituted, but their relationship has fluctuated over time. In this short intervention, I suggest that the city/state relationship is ultimately a historically contingent geopolitical phenomenon. States have occupied a central role in the process of urbanization since the 19th century in particular. However, cities – and attendant urban politics – have not been passive outcomes of state territorial formation processes but instead have occupied a pivotal role in the dynamic geopolitical processes of the nation-state. I define geopolitics in this context as a state-mediated production of territories of wealth, power, and belonging, and argue that the role of cities has altered over time in such a production process.

I propose in this essay that the developments during the past few decades indicate a qualitative shift in the city/state relation, and conceptualize this shift as the geopolitical growth of cities and city-regions. Originally a state-orchestrated process, today this is manifested in the recent attempts of major cities and city-regions, in particular, to demand a stronger national and international political

role even as claims are made for urban separatism. I stress that this process, which highlights the strategic role of major cities and city-regions, is connected to a geopolitical reasoning of the heightened role of cities in inter-state competition during the age of post-Fordist capitalism (Moisio, 2018). I also argue that the geopolitical growth of cities and city-regions is partly constituted in academic theories and expert knowledges that combine certain type of urbanism, economic growth, and political success, and which in so doing destabilize state-centered geopolitical imaginations.

Approaching the state-city relationship: The geopolitical growth of cities and city-regions

Max Weber stressed in his book *The City* (1921) how the rapid process of industrial urbanization in the 19th century, and the associated phenomenal population growth and physical expansion of cities in Europe and in North America in particular had not led to the growth of cities in a “sociological sense”. By this he meant that some of the earlier city forms – those characterized by fortification, city armies, and a sense of “community of survival”, to mention but a few – were being replaced by increasingly *national* cities. These latter cities were dominated by national governments, and characterized by inter-local activities and planning schemes of the nation-state and its “statist” interests. Weber further observed that the modern city was losing its previous external structure and that a new nation-state community was growing at its expense (Weber 1958). One may argue that this development culminated during the peak of spatial Keynesianism in post-WW2 Europe when cities became firmly connected to the functional geographies of the nation-state.

The observations of Weber are in stark contrast with often-heard contemporary narratives which suggest that cities are becoming increasingly functional and powerful actors in the world economy, global governance and even in world politics and, moreover, that this often seems to occur – or should occur – at the expense of the “dysfunctional” territorial state (see e.g. Ohmae, 1993; Barber,

2013). Accordingly, nation-states are being ever more “hollowed out” as a result of an increasingly city-centric nature of global forms of capital accumulation and associated “connectography” (Khanna, 2016). Such narratives are premised on, and in turn encourage, ontological and epistemological perspectives that ultimately separate the city from the state.

A closer analysis of the current context indicates a more complex coming-together of a city and the state. This can be briefly illustrated with a Finnish case, which is instructive not just on its own terms but also could be emblematic of state/city relations especially in small-to-medium sized states dominated by an expanding capital city and capital city region. The construction of the post-World War II welfare state in the Finnish context was characterized by security and growth political concerns. These concerns manifested themselves in the production of small-scale nationalizing urbanization throughout the state territory. In the 1990s, this model was replaced by *national* city-regionalism, a late-Keynesian attempt to bring together the state and processes of the knowledge-based economy through “technopolitization” (Moisio, 2018).

Today, urbanization in Finland is increasingly understood across the political spectrum as an inevitable and “positive” global megatrend to which the nation-state must be connected in different ways not just domestically but also beyond its borders. For example, the state needs to generate framework conditions within its borders for “Finnish” business firms which seek to tap into markets related to urbanization in China, for instance. But more importantly, cities, city-regions and urbanization within Finland figure prominently in contemporary debates on the future of the nation-state. Politicians across the political spectrum highlight that major Finnish cities in particular occupy an increasingly important role in the process of “national survival,” and that globally attractive cities and city-regions and related urban formations must be developed in Finland through urban politics and related public investments in order to enhance the international competitiveness

of the state. This “city talk” by the Finnish government, together with the chorus of both domestic and international experts, guru scholars, consultants and debaters has gradually, but definitely not surprisingly, empowered Finnish cities to demand a stronger political role in the context of both domestic and international affairs.

The developments in Finland and elsewhere do not signal the separation of cities from states, or the unravelling of state territory, but rather betray the geopolitical growth of cities and city-regions. In my usage, geopolitical urban growth refers to three issues in particular. First, it refers to the increasingly central role of major cities and city-regions in the strategies of state governments that seek to build nation-states as territories of wealth, power and belonging in the contemporary capitalist conjuncture. As it currently unfolds, the geopolitical growth of cities and city-regions therefore refers to a process which re-works the internal and external territorial organization of the state through strategies which pertain to major cities and city-regions (also Jonas, 2013; Jonas & Moisio 2016). As such, the geopolitical growth of cities and city-regions refers to the ways in which state governments, which are committed both to neo-liberal politics of international competitiveness and pursuing the national economic success of the territorial state, have a tendency to favour their already high-performing “national champion” cities (Crouch & Le Galès, 2012).

Second, the geopolitical growth of cities and city regions stands for the increasingly visible attempts of these national champions to occupy a more central role in “national” and “international” political processes. Third, the increasing attempts of major cities to develop their political agency are premised on and empowered by academic literatures, expert knowledges and urban consultancies that underscore the role of major cities, “global city-regions” or “megaregions” in the contemporary capitalist conjuncture, and articulate the standing of these geographical spaces as if they were forming (or should form) a new geography of power beyond states.

Concluding remarks

In this essay, the concept of the geopolitical growth of cities and city-regions has sought to render visible some of the recent developments in city/state relations. If most the 19th and 20th centuries was characterized by a geopolitical process of bringing the world of nation-states into the world of cities, the more recent development may signal processes whereby the world of cities is increasingly brought into the world of nation-states.

An interrogation of changing state-city relations offers a way of thinking about the social production and transformation of territory in capitalism, as well as the coming together of the external and internal territorial organization of the state. The co-constitution of the city and the state continues today irrespective of claims on the ways how cities are increasingly been detached from state territories, or how cities rather than states are functional economic spaces. Today, the state not only reinforces the role of major cities and city-regions in “national survival” but also harnesses city-spaces, the agency of cities, their symbolic value and their supposedly creative social milieux in the constant production of the state as a territory of national wealth, power and belonging. The geopolitical growth of cities and city-regions thus signals an increasingly urban-centric “competitive statehood” rather than the unravelling of the territorial state.

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